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Would you  a drink?

Youth drinking cultures, social media and
alcohol marketing online

About this research

The high level of alcohol consumption amongst young people in countries with more liberal alcohol policies has been a focus of public health concern for some time. Many young adults regularly engage in heavy drinking episodes with groups of friends to 'have fun' and 'be sociable'. More recently, this population has increased their use of new mobile and digital technologies (such as smartphones), and social networking Internet sites (such as Facebook and YouTube). Major alcohol companies are now investing heavily in online alcohol marketing. Up until now the impact of this strategy has been unclear.

This policy brief reports on recent and on-going research about how new technologies are used by young people and alcohol marketers, and their role in shaping young adults' drinking cultures. A current three-year study has involved interviews with 18 to 25 year olds from different ethnic groups in New Zealand (Aotearoa), and analysis of online representations of drinking, including alcohol marketing. However, the findings are likely to be applicable to other countries with a pervasive culture of heavy drinking amongst young people, including the UK.

The research concludes that online alcohol marketing aimed at young adults is widespread, highly dynamic and takes an ever-expanding range of forms as new digital and mobile technologies develop. Young people tend to view targeted alcohol marketing via social media as useful and informative, seldom recognising it as advertising. However, online alcohol marketing is pervasive across a range of social media platforms, and encourages a 'culture of intoxication' or 'extreme drinking' amongst young adults.

Research findings in context

Rapid growth in the use of new social networking technologies raises new issues regarding alcohol marketing, as well as potential impacts on drinking cultures more generally. The alcohol industry has made a substantial investment in digital marketing, outstripping the funding for public health initiatives and campaigns. Young people routinely tell and re-tell drinking stories online, share images depicting drinking, and are exposed to often intensive and novel forms of alcohol marketing.

This research was driven by the following research questions:

- How do drinking practices impact on young adults' identities?
- How are digital images (photos/videos) used to tell drinking stories online, and who are they shared with?
- How is alcohol and drinking represented online, both in marketing and young people's social media practices?
- How does this impact on young people's alcohol consumption and drinking cultures?
- How does this vary across young adults with different ethnicities (Maori, Pacific Island and European), social classes and genders?

The research found that all the young adults involved in this study engaged in the pervasive culture of drinking to intoxication. There were some cultural, gender, class and regional variations in how participants discussed their alcohol consumption, with those from European backgrounds most at ease in recounting their stories. Despite working with researchers who were clearly identifiable as from their cultural groups, Maori and Pacific Island participants were more cautious, reflecting their concerns about the possibility that relatives, employers, teachers, church and community members might access evidence of their alcohol use via their social media pages. European participants were more interested in how their social media profiles would be viewed by their peers. Overall, however, a strong pro-alcohol profile on Facebook was taken for granted and generally seen as a positive thing.

These sites reinforce the idea that drinking is about fun, pleasure, socialising and bonding. Alcohol brands have become an integral part of young people's everyday lives, reinforcing the widespread

Key findings

- Alcohol marketing is pervasive across social media, taking a variety of forms, such as branded smartphone apps that indicate how to "reach a state of pure inebriation" with the least calories or the lowest cost.
- Alcohol marketing online is not always identified as advertising by young people.
- Online alcohol marketing contributes to pro-alcohol or 'intoxigenic' environments and encourages drinking amongst young adults.
- The regulation of alcohol marketing should include new media and digital marketing.
- We need further research to gain a greater understanding of alcohol marketing via social media and its impact on young people's drinking cultures, using innovative online research methods that map onto the technologies and devices that people themselves are using.

Excerpts from focus groups with young adults

Krystal: "oh yeah, if you don't really remember what happened the night before, like you will see a photo and it will trigger your memory and then you will remember what happened".

Maori group; 2 males, 2 females

Lo: "It's memories as well and all your friends are out together on the piss and you do have fun. So you take photos and some of them will be funny photos, and you'll just look at them and crack up and go oh my gosh, do you remember when you were that wasted?" [laughing]

European group; 4 females



culture of intoxication. Although young women and men all spoke of getting (very) drunk, young women were more likely to discuss concerns about the risk of sexual assault and the need to remove 'tragic' photos of themselves posted on social media pages after drunken nights out.

Despite the vast amount of alcohol products, events and marketing on the internet, and particularly on Facebook, this content was not always viewed as marketing. For many research participants, only Facebook ads in the sidebar were interpreted as marketing. Research participants rarely recognised 'Facebook groups' emanating from bars, clubs and festivals as powerful forms of alcohol marketing, but rather viewed them as fun and informative sites on which they could interact with friends, posting and sharing photos and videos. Most participants treated the tailored 'notifications' they received on smartphones from bars and clubs, in real time and based on their geographic location, as highly informative and valuable (e.g. drinks promotions; cheap entry prices). Social media therefore offer important opportunities for alcohol marketing to young people – and alcohol companies have been quick to recognise this.

Large alcohol companies have invested heavily in digital marketing in recent years, far more than the money spent on safe drinking messages. Diageo, a multinational alcoholic beverages company headquartered in the UK, the world's largest producer of spirits and a major producer of beer and wine, announced in 2010 that social media marketing would account for 21% of its marketing budget. In 2011, Diageo stepped up their multi-million dollar partnership with Facebook, announcing that their brands had enjoyed a 20% increase in sales as a direct result of Facebook activity. Digital alcohol marketing is diverse, ranging from smartphone apps linked to specific brands, extensive social media presence associated with sports and other sponsorship, through to larger global investments such as the Smirnoff 'Nightlife Exchange Project (NEP)'. The latter involved a series of music events in cities across the world, branded by Smirnoff vodka, in which consumers were encouraged to 'like' NEP on Facebook and to post photos of themselves and friends at NEP events onto themed Facebook pages.

Overall, the research finds that online alcohol marketing contributes to pro-alcohol environments and encourages drinking amongst young adults, operating as what have been termed 'intoxigenic digital spaces'. As commercial platforms, social

network sites use sophisticated dataminers and algorithms to combine and sell data to third parties, including commercial alcohol interests. By engaging with online marketing, site users are also providing personal data to the drinks companies. Every click and interaction with an alcohol product page on Facebook gives data about the individual. This information is used to present users with marketing that is personally tailored to them; that is, targeted advertising based on identity, interests, peer network, attendance at events, or location.

Policy implications

Digital alcohol marketing shapes young people's alcohol consumption, not least through the reinforcement of cultural norms around intoxication. Therefore, the regulation of alcohol marketing should include new media and digital marketing, and include new and evolving marketing activities.

Traditional behaviour change approaches to tackling young adults' excessive alcohol consumption are highly individualised, and unlikely to succeed in this context. A wider range of policies and safer drinking initiatives that target the cultural norm of drinking to intoxication are required. Furthermore, current attempts at health promotion are outmoded, and need to employ social media and mobile technologies more effectively to challenge the messages from alcohol marketing.

The researchers recommend the need to conduct studies that examine corporate practices and digital alcohol marketing strategies – and implement effective alcohol policies in the light of this information.

Further research on the impact of digital alcohol marketing on young people in the UK will continue via a Bath University PhD studentship, starting in October 2014 under the supervision of University of Bath Professors Christine Griffin (Department of Psychology) and Anna Gilmore (Department of Health). This is in collaboration with the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies (UKCTAS) - a strategic partnership comprising 13 University teams working on tobacco and alcohol research and funded by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration.

Methodology

The research involved 141 young adults aged between 18-25 years living in New Zealand (Aotearoa) who were also highly engaged with new technologies, particularly social network sites such as Facebook. The participants were from three major ethnic groups, Maori, Pacific Island, and non-Maori/Pakeha of European descent, and from different social classes, geographic locations, genders and ages. The study involved 34 informal friendship group discussions with groups of Maori, Pacific Island and European friends, and 23 individual interviews with online access and ongoing website interaction. Participants were given access to a laptop with an Internet connection and asked to browse the web to show the sites, images, and videos they talk about and access regularly. These Facebook 'tours' were screen recorded and linked to interview transcripts. Finally, the project analysed representations of young people's drinking online, including popular internet sites and alcohol marketing, to provide further insight into both global and local drinking cultures and their interconnections. All interviews were carried out by female doctoral students attached to the project and matched to the cultural strand with which they were working.

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The interview and focus group research was carried out by three PhD students: Patricia Niland (Massey University, New Zealand), Acushla Dee O'Carroll and Tuiloma Lina Samu (Whariki Research Unit, Massey University, New Zealand).

More on this research:

McCreanor, T., Lyons, A., Goodwin, I., Moewaka Barnes, H., Griffin, C. and Hutton, F. (2013). Youth drinking cultures, social networking and alcohol marketing: Implications for public health. *Critical Public Health*, 23(1): 110-120.

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